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Editor's Note

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Editor's Note

Padraig O'Malley

There is probably a theorem dusting off its webs in a closet confining theorems concocted in White Hen Pantries, which says that given the exponential rate of growth of information technology, the limited human ability to absorb will require us to redefine the ways in which we process information. But since we could, if we were so inclined, process *ad infinitum* without ever becoming appreciably more informed about most things, we have chosen a more practical way of dealing with our predicament. We have substituted our perennial pursuit of wanting to know more (about what is irrelevant; it's the wanting that counts) that the pursuit itself has displaced the value we put on the information we unearth, if only because we know that whatever we do uncover is either incomplete or has been replaced with more up-to-the-microsecond information our technologies keep churning out, confusing us, and cluttering our lives with the pointless.

The past, because of our callow indifference, counts for little. Not that we do not remember it — we do, but fleetingly, and then we proceed to disgorge it to make room for the new. In our Brave New World, the inexorable flood of information transmogrifying our universe impels us to dismiss everything except the instantaneous flow of the instantaneous, thus consigning the past to an impermanence that temporizes the search for anything that has meaning.

Sentiments, I think, best expressed by Thomas Barlow in a recent article in the *Financial Times*:

Technology, with science its handmaiden, is now recognized as the pre-eminent driver of development. The paradox: the very knowledge we acquire about the world increasingly allows us to change it, and at changing it we seem particularly adept at making it incomprehensible again.

How are democracies supposed to steer their way when the dominant force shaping society [technology/science] remains partly incomprehensible to so many of us? Put another way: how can we be sure that we are controlling our technology and science, rather than the other way round? How can we ensure that technology is not a driverless cart, and science its runaway horse?¹

Take the driverless cart and the presidential election we had last year. (Yes, we had a presidential election!) In particular, take Florida. In November and December, during the tumultuous days of the electoral recounts for president in the Sunshine state (remember? that is president, as in President of the United States) in case you've moved on to other things, which will, if you have not, make you truly un-American, we were inundated with the minutiae of chads, dimpled, pregnant, half pregnant, hanging, or otherwise dangling in some precarious feat of acrobatic

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athleticism staving off the numerous attempts to shake them loose, thus reducing their one privileged moment of national significance to naught. Every dot.com (yes, they still existed then) worth its valueless stock provided us with the instantaneous state of recounts polling station by polling station, with projections based on the flimsiest data (projections were supposed to be a no-no at this point since the competitive interests of networks to be the first to provide us with instantaneous results, to be the first to “call” the election, were the cause of all the hullabaloo that followed).

We were exposed to the mysteries of the butterfly ballot, of the role of the lepidopterist in the voting system. We learned that hundreds of imperfectly designed and outdated ballot-counting machines that belonged in scrap metal yards rather than in polling stations spewed out thousands of perfectly valid votes because they could not “catch” them. Pundits earned hundreds of thousands of dollars for indulging in small public bouts of self-flagellation. Constitutional scholars taught us that they knew as much about the Constitution as our local bar hops. The Supreme Court abrogated to itself the right to determine the outcome of a presidential election by invoking every abstruse argument it could muster, but without ever citing the articles of the Constitution that conferred this unique dispensation to it — which, to be fair it couldn’t, since the Constitution contains no such articles.

Al Gore saved his best moment for the last, behaving like a bona fide candidate only when the need to do so had become irrelevant and the nation “put the past behind it,” as only the nation could, having elevated the practice to an art. And when the dust had settled, after ten microseconds or so, we were instantaneously immersed in the need to re-examine the way in which we conducted our elections so that a Florida-like fiasco would never again insult the integrity of our electoral process.

After 100-plus days in office, George W seems to be beating the expectations odds; but since they were set at such a low level, this is not an accomplishment one would rush to include in one’s CV. He is relaxed, laid back, charming, and becoming a master of the art of self-deprecating humor. Meanwhile, he pushes ahead with his agenda, dismantling many of Clinton’s programs, thumbing his nose at the Europeans, upping the ante with North Korea and China, angering the Russians, but making out with the Mexicans — we are about to enter the amigo era.

His tax cut of \$1.6 trillion (a trillion is 1,000,000,000,000) is getting trimmed back a little so that the well-off can look forward in time to absorbing 80 percent of its benefits. His budget of \$136 trillion, which he presented to Congress, will be debated, not for the sum of its expenditures but for the priorities to which they are directed. (If you want to bring a little perspective to things, look at it this way: Kofi Annan, secretary-general of the UN, says that an expenditure of \$15 billion for a decade would save Africa from AIDS, save us from being spectators to Africa’s slow slide off the face of the earth. And if you feel bad about that, you can buy yourself a pair of Dolce & Gabbana blue jeans, with brooches and fringes, which are held together on the seams by safety pins, for a piddling \$2,222.)

George keeps to himself, is perhaps, the least visible president of the last forty years, and whenever trouble looms, he reminds us that he is the education president, the implication being that his compassion for our children always gets the better of his conservatism, the latter being something he leaves to his henchmen who, like Bush himself, are people of few words but increasingly let their actions speak for

themselves. When their actions are deciphered they point in one direction: conservatism is back with a bounce.

The Democrats are a little puzzled about this, since they were under the impression that given the circumstances in which he was elected, George W would reach out to them in a spirit of bipartisanship. Wrong assumption. George governs as though he carried every state, and while he does reach out to Democrats, it is to shake their outstretched hands, not to reach policy accommodations, although he is willing to give a little here and there: a little food on the doorstep keeps the wolves from the door.

Not that there are discernible wolves out there. Clinton, never one to be underestimated, decided, on leaving office, to self-immolate. On good advice, he went to India and Africa to empathize with the poor and lowly, and they have responded with the usual outpourings of adoration, something to which our Bill is addicted. The pardons issue lingers in the background — steely prosecutors, promises of immunity to potential witnesses, and a steady parade of former Clintonites before grand juries. If things get really bad, he can always go to Northern Ireland where they would canonize him, bless him with sainthood, were sainthood and funny things of that nature not regarded with deep suspicion by one community, which is party to a conflict that continues to simmer in water that will not boil.

But back to the chads. *The New York Times* reports:

Despite the outcry over last year's presidential election, the next national election will probably occur under virtually the same circumstances as the last, with the same unreliable voting systems and under the same dizzying hodgepodge of rules that vary from county to county across the nation.

The reasons vary, from a lack of cash to partisan positioning and difficulties in interpreting the U.S. Supreme Court decision that finally ended the presidential contest. Those studying to overhaul the system have found that it is exceedingly complex.

"There is no technical fix to the problem," said Thomas Mann, a scholar at the Brookings Institution. "There's no possibility of a uniform national ballot. There are contradictory findings on the accuracy of different voting equipment."

And so far there is no money. At a hearing on Capitol Hill, state election officials painted a bleak picture of the improvements they might be able to achieve by the mid-term elections in 2002, particularly if Congress and the White House continued to sidestep the issue. Researchers have reached conflicting conclusions on what technology is best. Even if they could agree on a machine with the lowest error rate, would voters easily adapt? Examinations of ballots in Florida showed that some people failed to register their choices, whether from ignorance, hostility to the candidates or the system.

Moreover, ideas that once seemed panaceas — Internet voting, scrapping the Electoral College, even uniform poll-closing nationwide have been discredited. And those with a stake in the process — political parties and officials from federal, state, and county governments — are lapsing into predictable squabbles over advantage and turf.²

And it concludes:

Setting national and state standards for ballots and recounts might have seemed a logical response to the mess in Florida. But it is becoming increasingly clear that the election officials are resistant to giving up turf. And untangling the roles of federal, state, and local officials is emerging as a central obstacle.³

What emerged from the Florida recount was not that the process of voting and ballot counting was remiss in Florida, but that it was the norm across the country. It had only come to light in Florida because the stakes were so high. For years, in other words, we have had a voting system that is undemocratic no matter what yard-

stick is used, one that would not pass muster in countries undergoing transition to democratization. In these countries we oversee the process: the registration documents to prove the voter's identification; the indelible ink marks on the thumb to ensure that the voter can only vote once; the close monitoring of the ballot casting to ensure that voters understand for whom they are voting; the ballots marked with a simple X alongside the candidate of one's choice; the deposit of the marked ballots into the counting boxes that will be sealed in the presence of representatives of all the parties who participated in the election at the conclusion of the voting process; the convoys to accompany the boxes that are transported to the designated counting centers; the overseeing of the opening of the boxes to ensure no fraudulent ballots were deposited en route or additional "stuffed" ballot boxes winding up in the counting centers; the hand counting of votes, monitored both by "official" observers and party representatives; the process for dealing with contested ballots. Yes, we are the self-anointed guardians against hanky-panky. We insist on every single detail of the process being observed, and then issue reports declaring whether the elections were fair and free — "free and fair," of course, according to the standards we have dictated.

We are hypocrites of the first order. As one who has been part of international election monitoring teams in five countries, I would be ashamed to return to these countries and tell their election officials that if they were to use the voting and counting procedures used in the United States, with arbitrary rules, different voting equipment of different quality in different parts of the country, we would have to make a judgment that while their elections were free at best, we would be unable to stamp them with the legitimacy of being fair. We would stigmatize them in the international community, perhaps "chastise" them for their errant ways by cutting donor aid or finding some other way to make life more miserable, not for the bureaucrats who run their independent electoral commissions, but for the great majority of the uneducated masses who took the pains to learn how to register to vote, how to vote, and how to acquire the necessary documentation that would certify them as members of their respective communities.

And yet, in our own backyard, we do not measure up to the values we "impose" on others. After the brouhaha subsided, we turned a blind eye to the massive imperfections in our own systems. What hubris! And what contempt for the voters of this country! If nothing is done to rectify the glaring flaws in the system in every state of the union, voter turnouts, already among the lowest in the developed "democracies," will plummet. Why bother to vote when your vote may never be tallied? The results of every election that comes within a mile of being close will be challenged.

Perhaps we should consider taking a leaf out of our own book and ask election officials from the countries we have been rudely lecturing on democratic practices to come to the United States and observe our elections to see whether they meet the criteria that define "free and fair." But then, damn it, we are the United States: Best, Biggest, and Brightest, and so what if former presidents Ford and Carter, after observing Peru's recent national election, reported that Peru's voter registration system was "far superior" to the systems used in the United States.⁴

II

In a moving and touching event at the John F. Kennedy Library in April, but one punctuated with humor, much laughter, and the wit that many a roast would envy,

the Institute presented Dr. Tom Durant, assistant director of the Massachusetts General Hospital, with the John Joseph Moakley Award for Distinguished Public Service. Dr. Durant was honored for his contribution to medical relief efforts among refugees in more countries than I could list in this space — Rwanda, Cambodia, Somalia, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Bosnia, and the list goes on. There are, according to Durant, some 66 million refugees in the world, people either internally displaced or having to flee their countries owing to the calamities of conflict, disease, persecution, drought, famine, and that list also goes on.

Among the guests in attendance was Dr. Ann Goldfeld, who was singled out by Dr. Durant for her efforts in the international campaign to ban land mines.

Mention of land mines brought back memories of Angola, a country that is wired with land mines from Uíge on the border of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to Xangongo, close to the border with Namibia.

Many historians believe that the air battle between the Cubans and South Africans for control of the strategically important town of Cuito Cuanavale in Angola, which South Africa lost to the Cubans in December 1987, inflicted the first dent in the seemingly invincible South African armor of supremacy. Indeed, the arms embargo on South Africa can take a good deal of credit for the South African loss. Although South Africa's troops, armor, and artillery, the products of its own arms industry, were the most sophisticated in the region, the South African Defence Force lacked air supremacy. Angola's modest MIG fighters, supplied by the Soviet Union and flown by Cuban pilots, were more than a match for South Africa's aging Mirages, which South Africa could neither replace nor refurbish.

Cuito Cuanavale assumed a symbolic significance beyond its strategic value, with the Cubans vowing to hold it and the South Africans determined to take it. More than any single battle, Cuito Cuanavale brought South Africa to the negotiating table and forced it to think in terms of new strategic paradigms. In the settlement that followed, bringing independence to Namibia in line with Resolution 435 of the United Nations Security Council, the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola, and an end to South Africa's support for Jonas Savimbi's Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), the "securocrats" who had dominated South Africa's strategic campaign to contain the continuing waves of political unrest in South Africa's townships, orchestrated by the black liberation movements to end apartheid, secure the release of Nelson Mandela, and establish a democratic, nonracial South Africa, lost both prestige and influence. The diplomats in South Africa's Department of Foreign Affairs were catapulted into more prominent and influential positions, facilitating the talks that ultimately led to Mandela's release and in 1994 to South Africa's "miracle" election.

I knew I had to go to Cuito Cuanavale, walk the ground of the airstrip, gauge the width and depth of the Cuito River that had, in 1987, separated the Cubans and South Africans. The problem was how to get there. The civil war in Angola between Savimbi's UNITA and the MPLA government of Jose Eduardo dos Santos was in its twenty-second year. Both sides could afford to keep the conflict going indefinitely. UNITA controlled the diamond-rich areas of the country, the government its immense oil reserves. The war had ravaged the country, turning one of Africa's most mineral-rich countries into a gigantic pothole and mines were the weapon of choice in the bush war. As territory exchanged hands, the retreating side randomly scattered land mines — limpet mines mostly — across the terrain, making pursuit difficult

and often impossible. By the most reliable estimates, some 15 million mines are buried in Angola's soil, which amounts to 31 land mines per square mile. Worldwide there are probably 110 million land mines in 64 countries, but these are only "best" estimates, since the reality is that no one knows for sure, because no matter how great the effort to demine — the deminers themselves are the first to admit that their efforts are largely futile — that for each mine they unearth, at least 10,000 escape detection.

In Angola, the resources to ferret out the lethal devices are hamstrung by the war itself. You have the farcical situation where the government pays lip service to the efforts of the UN to orchestrate minesweeping drives in the hinterlands; yet the government itself continues to plant mines in the areas it controls. Land mines are popular because they inflict damage at a minimum cost — between three to ten dollars to purchase, eight hundred to one thousand dollars to remove.

Mines control people. In the countryside, where most of the fighting, other than the set ground battles, takes place, the local inhabitants are afraid to step outside their mud huts because the slightest venture into the open may be one's last; every step one takes might trigger the concealed trip wire, and the survivor, if he or she is lucky, will only lose part of a leg, becoming one more statistic in the catalog of land mine casualties, one more live cripple.

An immobile population is easy to control; whichever side governs a particular area has no fear of locals "siding" with the enemy, of being ambushed when it is least on guard. The risks make allegiances of that nature foolhardy in the extreme. Thus, people in villages in the path of war simply switch allegiances, depending on who their occupiers are —UNITA one day, the MPLA the next. Cease-fires have been called; settlements brokered; and treaties signed. But all for naught. This war is about greed and who will hold power — issues of governance are a secondary consideration.

In Luanda, the capital, you begin to get some idea of the devastation the mines have wrought. Every other person has a stump leg; some hobble along, some maneuver their way using rickety sticks; some crawl or are ferried in homemade carts by friends. One begins to form the impression that an Angolan with two functioning legs is either a government bureaucrat or an exception. A crippled society is peopled with cripples.

Getting to Luanda is not difficult, and I arrive there late in 1997 to stake out my options. There are daily flights from Johannesburg. Usually one has to make reservations days in advance; in war there is profit, especially when the commodities up for grabs are diamonds, which must be paid for in hard currency by clandestine routes, shipments of sophisticated weaponry if you are working with UNITA or to get access to the potentially rich offshore oil drilling sites that the government is more than eager to lease to the oil conglomerates, if you are working with the government. The conglomerates dispatch their deal makers, who converge, like vultures, on Luanda. When the government you are dealing with is among the most corrupt in the world and everything has a price, you never leave empty-handed if you arrive with full pockets.

Getting anywhere else in Angola can be a nightmare. Most roads have been destroyed, semi-destroyed, or are impassible. So you try the hitchhike route — by plane, usually the Hercules 130s that ferry goods across the country, bring supplies to remote areas, enabling relief organizations to continue with their work. Without

these huge birds, relief would be impossible to administer and basic supplies would never reach their intended destinations.

The routine: turn up at Luanda's international airport, inquire where UN flights are heading that day, and if you are lucky, they will find space for you somewhere amid the hundreds of tons of cargo, from motor vehicles to tanks of gasoline, agricultural appliances, stockpiles of beer, and what appear to be endless stocks of baby diapers. We (my Portuguese translator and I) luck out. On the second day, a UN carrier is flying to Huambo, and from Huambo on to Menongue. Flying on a Hercules is a nonexperience. Because the plane has no windows, one is simply confined to a space that has no point of reference. You can see nothing; hence there is nothing against which to measure movement. The plane lumbers into the sky with surprisingly little effort for its gigantic size and payload. But once airborne, one has the sense of being motionless, of being suspended in space, of things having stopped. You are not going anywhere because there are no indicators that you are. The stillness adds to the claustrophobia, the claustrophobia to anxiety.

CARE runs its operations for the province, Cuando Cubango, from Menongue. White, clean-cut young men and women in their twenties, mostly from France but with a small contingent of Brits, run the operation. Their function is to provide the logistical help to facilitate the "professionals" the UN will bring in to identify in geometrical patterns areas of high mine-risk; they, in turn, are followed by the minesweepers who clear the designated areas, the "markers" who demarcate the routes one must follow in order to avoid becoming one more statistic, and finally CARE workers move into the concentration of small villages that define the area to "secure" them, as it were, but with the purpose of teaching the local inhabitants how to navigate the cleared areas, how to change their behaviors.

The color-coded maps, covering the walls of the CARE HQ, look impressive; the constant crackle of walkie-talkies conveys the impression of an operation making headway. One color signifies an area that is highly mined; a second color identifies areas that have been swept clean, areas that are now open to the local people; but the third color, red, signifies the vast tracts that are still no-go areas.

Red pins are all over the maps. Unfortunately, because of cutbacks in aid, CARE will be leaving the area at the end of the year. And unfortunately, too, when you ask the young, earnest workers whether their presence has made a difference, they hesitate. The task is well beyond their ability to make a significant difference; they lack the necessary resources, and aid donors increasingly direct aid to areas of interest, not to the areas of most need. The task itself is impossible — like finding a needle in a haystack.

But they are most helpful. Within hours, they have found us both a driver who will take us to Cuito Cuanavale and the skeletal remains of what once was a van to make the journey; dollars and a bottle of whiskey change hands and we are on our way. In this part of Angola, hard liquor is a currency as valuable as dollars. The UN planes bring in supplies of liquor, but they are mostly for members of UNIVEM, the peacekeeping force that has no peace to keep, leaving local towns that are not in the "distribution" link without a drop of the hard stuff.

Cuito Cuanavale is about 100 meters from Menongue, but it might as well be a thousand. There is no road, only a series of craters you gingerly maneuver your way around. Progress is agonizingly slow, taking us five hours to make the trip. In some places, the road simply disappears. Locals, who make their living out of this sort of

thing, appear out of nowhere and come up with wooden planks; makeshift “bridges” are assembled; more dollars and a little whiskey change hands.

Our anxiety begins to surface. Unless we reach Cuito Cuanavale before nightfall, we will be stranded. And when night falls, the temperature drops precipitously: Our clothes are inadequate; we will freeze. The barren wasteland that stretches out on all sides provides no protection — trees, plants, living things, have been bombed out of existence. Even the birds have fled. The eerie silence is our only companion; my imagination creates scenes of battle that littered the countryside with the dead and left the burnt-out instruments of destruction as testimonials to the fact that once upon a time people lived in these empty spaces, laughed, cried, and made love.

During the five-hour jolting session not a single vehicle passes us in either direction. The landscape is strewn with the wreckage of war, downed MIG 28s here, anti-personnel carriers there, tanks that appear to have run out of petrol all over the place; most appear to be in good working order, if you forgive them their rustiness. We begin to joke; maybe we’ll have to try to hole up in an abandoned tank for the night. UNITA’s or the MPLA’s? Who gives a damn?

But God or the spirits of the ancestors are with us. We reach Cuito Cuanavale at dusk. It is a traditional African village; fires provide light and heat; children in T-shirts emblazoned with American slogans for American products they have never heard of still scamper at play. The huts in which the local population lives are dilapidated. Most brick buildings have been destroyed; the half-destroyed ones are still used for “municipal” purposes. There is a small market area; you can walk its length in five minutes. Unlike marketplaces in other parts of the sub-Sahara, Cuito Cuanavale’s is unhurried, perhaps because there is so little in the stalls — biscuits, a few fish, and small assortments of fruit. There is no appearance of “life,” or it escapes us.

We move quickly to the compound where we will stay: a small enclosed area at the perimeter of the village with the flag of the de Beers company at full mast in case some stranger passing through on his journey to nowhere might not see for himself the selfless philanthropy of the diamond kings. The camp is self-contained; insulated tents that are surprisingly comfortable for the minesweepers. This is where they live and sleep for six months at a stretch or until the boredom or their work gets to them. There is an electric generator, light at night and fridges to keep the beer cold.

I have hardly settled in when I hear a gusty voice. “Hi, mate.” A Brit here at the end of the earth! His name is Alan Calton from Norwich. “How did you end up here,” I ask him as he opens a couple of ice-cold beers. Simple enough. He was a minesweeper in the British army, and when he had done his time, he went to work in the private sector doing what he knew what to do: minesweeping. He works for a company in London, Greenfields, which specializes in the minesweeping business, a lucrative one with some 100 million of the deadly buggers to be disposed of. “Did you ever work in Northern Ireland?” My question is more out of curiosity than anything else. He laughs. Did he ever!

Crossmaglen in County Armagh, close to the border with the Republic, is “bandit country,” Provo (Provisional IRA) territory, the staging point for IRA operations in the North. In South Armagh the IRA is among its own people. Hatred of the British “occupation” unites the people. In the center of Crossmaglen, the Brits had built their largest fortress, a magnificently ugly barracks that disfigured the town. Its

sophisticated surveillance equipment would try to pinpoint IRA movements and move soldiers out to “terminate” the would-be “terrorists.” The fortress was among the most hated symbols of “British rule” in Northern Ireland, an “up yours!” to the residents of Crossmaglen who comported in Paddy Shorts’s pub to plan its demolition over numerous pints of Guinness stout. Indeed, the area was deemed to be so dangerous that army patrols were limited and the barracks itself was supplied by helicopter airlifts.

But some things — hard military equipment and the like — could not be airlifted. Most of the hard equipment had to be brought in by road, and therein lay the problem: the roads approaching Crossmaglen were the most mined in Northern Ireland, hence the need for the Alan Caltons of the army.

They were the minesweepers. When shipments of armaments and other heavy-duty stuff were due, the minesweepers were moved into the Crossmaglen area under layers of protection. They worked around the clock for seventy-two hours, sweeping the entire area, destroying or immobilizing mines, hidden homemade bombs (nothing like plain old fertilizer to create an explosive of extreme potency) or anything that remotely could obstruct the convoy of trucks that immediately followed them, once their work was done.

After seventy-two hours, the minesweepers were removed from the area, given twenty-four hours to sleep it off, and quartered back in their barracks until their services were once again needed. Neither Alan nor his buddies had the slightest idea why they were in Northern Ireland; to their unpracticed eye it was a case of one group of bloody Paddys fighting another group of bloody Paddys for reasons they couldn’t fathom or had no interest in fathoming. They were simple minesweepers, and Crossmaglen was probably one of the best places for a professional minesweeper to practice his trade, hone his skills.

We laughed about the absurdity of the situation. I told him how often I had passed through Crossmaglen, stopped at Paddy Shorts’s, signed his “guest” book for visitors, downed the creamy pints, and listened to the stories of the local pundits — often in their seventies but still planning mayhem, probably, I said, against the likes of himself.

He had a “mission” in the morning. The crew was going to clear an area and I was welcome to join them if I wished to do so. I wished to do so.

On my way back to my tent, I walked to the outer reach of the encampment. Nothing but the absoluteness of silence against a star-filled sky, bright enough to throw shadows of light over the Cuito River, listless and meandering. Beyond the river was? I would never know. Only that the “road” we had come in on was supposed to struggle on to Mavingo, but the impassable bridge, still not rebuilt since it had been destroyed in 1987, cut the journey short. Not that it made much difference, I was told.

The area on that side of the river had not been swept for mines; an attempt to push farther on would be suicidal. Yet, as I stood in the stillness, nothing moving, I felt I was in the middle of a false calm. I had forgotten that Cuito Cuanavale had the unenviable distinction of being one of the most mined areas in the world, and one of the most forgotten. Sure, Alan and his team could save some legs, but their contract expired at the end of the year and it wasn’t quite clear yet whether the UN could provide the funding necessary to keep the operation going. He intended to return to his wife and kids for a couple of months and then take on another assignment in one more godforsaken spot. That’s how he earned his living. Crossmaglen with a twist.

By 1997 the course of the war in Angola had made Cuito Cuanavale strategically unimportant for both sides; neither journalists nor TV crews saw much value in featuring it in their stories; besides the fact that it was difficult to get to, had no amenities, no hotels, no watering holes or even a place to eat, would turn it into a one-day venture at best because it would be even more difficult to get out of, given that night was an enemy with which they could not contend.

We set out at 8:00 A.M. Alan and the others are different now. This is business and they never lose sight of the fact that it is dangerous work, that the slightest mistake on the part of one can damage the lives of all, that focus, concentration, and punctilious attention to detail, to remembering that the repetition of what they had done so many times made it easy to let the mind wander, and that was the kiss of death. Conversation is terse. No idle chatter. Each step of the operation is checked and then rechecked; equipment is tested to ensure no malfunctions; the room for error, misunderstanding, and miscalculation is methodically eliminated.

We approach the “identified” area. The one imperative: go slowly; impatience is deadly. They work in two teams, each team consisting of two people. One does the demining, the other acts as an observer making sure the deminer is observing all procedures correctly. They switch roles regularly. This morning the teams will destroy the mines manually.

They use pointed metal probes and trowels and work within a one-meter lane that has been predetermined. The metal probes pierce the ground at an angle of approximately 30 degrees to a minimum depth of 15 centimeters in maximum increments of 5 centimeters. Horizontal and forward progress intervals never exceed the minimum surface area of the smallest mine likely to be discovered in the clearance area. Alan’s teams play it safe: they proceed at intervals of 3 centimeters, ensuring that the smallest mines will be detected by the probe. When a mine is discovered it is removed ever so carefully with the hand or trowel before the depth of excavation is increased. Whenever one of their probes makes contact with an object, the ground beneath it is again ever so carefully removed using the probes and fingers until the object is removed. They check ever so carefully for any attached trip wires and particularly for other devices buried below the exposed mine. They destroy a mine by placing an explosive adjacent to it. They insert a detonator in the explosive, which is attached to a length of fuse. We move back a safe distance and Alan detonates the charge — as the teams’ leader, he reserves to himself the right to detonate.⁵ The others call him a bloody fascist.

And so the morning wears on. The sun is hot; the pace of progress enough to try one’s patience. At noon Alan calls it quits for the day. In the business, concentration is essential; once it begins to flag it’s time to call a halt. Time for a couple of cold beers. The morning’s “take”: four limpet mines; at this rate Alan will clear the area three centuries hence.

Given the concentration of the mines, the idea is not to clear an area in the full meaning of the word but to cut a safe path through an area, to create “safe” routes that people can travel through, even though adjacent areas might be teeming with mines. The “safe” lanes are about fifty paces in width. The mined areas that buttress them are fenced in. Thus, what is called “marking.” The use of markers is pivotal. Here they use red and white poles. Red is the safe side, white the danger side. “Marking” has a direct impact in reducing risk to the community by making risk areas clearly visible.

In the afternoon, we participate in a ritual of sorts. A safe lane has been cut through a minefield. But the local people don't quite believe it is safe until they see others use it. What counts in marking is that the community recognizes the perimeter of a minefield and the consequences of crossing markers. So Alan and his team and several CARE workers and I, at their invitation, link hands and walk the length of the lane together. Nothing explodes; the local people who gathered to watch applaud. Time for another cold beer. One small victory for Anna Goldfeld.

Later, we watch a pantomime. The CARE workers use it to teach children how to avoid risk areas and how to use the safe lanes, with a premium on their not straying off the marked lanes. Everyone in the village watches the pantomime; there is much laughter and applause, and as children play different roles or are asked to imitate the actions of the CARE workers, you can see them preen with pride. There's no value we can put on the worth of a little recognition.

Eventually, I got to the airstrip, but that is another story.

III

The back down by the pharmaceutical companies on making the drugs used to concoct drug cocktails to treat HIV/ AIDS available to countries in the sub-Sahara at enormously reduced prices is being heralded as some kind of breakthrough. That it is, but a breakthrough that comes with a lot of assumptions.

More access to drugs will postpone the inevitable for a while, but drugs do nothing for prevention. Unless there is a massive campaign to underscore this difference, prevention programs may suffer as more African men assume there is no need to use condoms, now that the "miracle" drugs are being made available.⁶

Moreover, access to free drugs in Africa is not the problem. How they are administered is.

Dr. Richard D'Aquila, one of the most prominent experts in the field of drug therapy has warned:

People taking anti-HIV medications must be careful to take every dose of their medicines, to take them at the correct times and in the correct manner, and to store the medicines properly to maintain the concentration of drugs in the drug stream to fully control viral replication. **The single most important thing a patient can do to avoid drug resistance is to be faithful to his or her drug regimen.**⁷

If one applies these criteria to Africa, the conclusions are not all that encouraging. There are no public health systems remotely capable of delivering, administering, monitoring, and evaluating the impact of either making drugs available at lower prices or free of cost. In the sub-Sahara, where more than 70 percent of HIV-infected people live, many in unimaginatively squalid conditions, there are no trained personnel to train staff who would ensure that drugs are being used properly.

We assume that people know how to tell the time — or pay attention to time. Or that their concepts of time are the same as ours. We assume that AIDS patients can master the combinations of drugs they must take at specifically designated times, some with food, some without — not a problem for the starving — some during the day and some during the night. We assume that adequate storage facilities are available.

We assume that there will be no black market in drug dealing. We assume that there will be no corruption. We assume that the crime syndicates that proliferate

throughout Africa and are often more efficient than many of the continent's governments won't want their piece of the "action." We assume that a network of clinics, pharmacies, laboratories, doctors, nurses, and paramedics will mystically materialize in rural and urban areas, tailored to the specific needs of each and within easily available transport routes. We assume adequate transport routes.

We assume efficient supervision, continuous monitoring, and professional evaluations. We assume an adequately minimal supply of doctors — Ethiopia, not an isolated example, has 4 doctors for every 100,000 people; the United States has 245 per 100,000.

We assume patients' cooperation. We assume that patients will stick with it when every cocktail will leave them sick and exhausted, and half ready to throw in the towel. (Did you know that here, in the United States, 80 percent adherence to drug regimens is the best that can be expected, even among the best educated, most motivated patients?)⁸

We assume that people can differentiate among colors (in the Xhosa language the word for green and blue is the same). We assume that the deeply ingrained stigmas that accompany public knowledge of one's HIV status will inexplicably disappear. We assume a mysterious end to prejudice. We assume radical changes in tradition, local cultures, and the role of traditional medicine.

We assume that governments can establish sophisticated networks of interrelated activities that must function in synchronization, which in the sub-Sahara is more than asking a lot. It's asking the impossible. We assume a degree of political leadership that is flagrantly absent — pusillanimous leaders in some countries no longer advertise condom use because of pressure from religious leaders who see these advertisements as sanction for sex. We assume governments that will not turn down opportunities for access to cheaper drugs, or that issue ridiculous reports in which "eminent" members make stupid statements that AIDS would disappear if afflicted countries just stopped testing for HIV.

We assume that the West will kick in with the necessary resources to get something substantial off the ground, that consumers here will foot the bill for the world's R&D so that drugs can be sold far more cheaply in Africa, a far-off place that is to most people a basket case. We assume that "sacrifices" of this nature will be politically acceptable in rich countries, especially in the miserly United States.

And I could go on.

* * *

I hope you enjoy this issue of the *New England Journal of Public Policy*. I bring two articles to your attention: Richard Card's "Very Like a Whale" and Gabriel O'Malley's "An Effective Compromise: Class-Based Affirmative Action in Boston Schools." Card will contribute to the journal regularly. O'Malley, as you Sherlock-Holmes-like types might deduce, is a relative, a nephew in fact. But since we Irish, as you all know, are notoriously given to the practice of nepotism, who am I to do a good prejudice an injustice? Besides, how could we live without access to the merits of stereotyping?

P.S.: As we go to press, the media report that Florida has enacted legislation that will do away with hanging, butterfly ballots, and questions about determining voter intent. It will also require that ballots in extremely close elections be recounted by

hand. The new legislation will replace the old punch-card voting system with optical scanning systems and touch-screen technologies. It will also create provisional ballots to prevent disenfranchising citizens who are wrongly removed from the rolls.

Hallelujah!

Only another forty-nine states to go!

Notes

1. *Financial Times*, May 12/13, 2001.
2. *New York Times*, April 26, 2001.
3. *Ibid*.
4. *New York Times*, April 30, 2001.
5. For detailed information about every aspect of land mines, see Rae McGrath, *Landmines and Unexploded Ordnance: A Resource Book* (London: Pluto Press, 2000).
6. In the United States, the Food and Drug Administration sent letters to eight makers of anti-AIDS drugs warning that their products could no longer be advertised without noting their limitations. The makers must add the cautionary words that their drugs are not a cure for AIDS or that they prevent the spread of HIV. The letters also warned against using ads with images that are not generally representative of patients with HIV, particularly photographs of "robust individuals engaged in strenuous activity" like climbing mountains. For some time, critics of advertisements for anti-AIDS drugs have been contending that the ads may contribute to a rise in the rate of HIV infections among impressionable people who perceive AIDS as no more than another debilitating illness, much like a lingering cold or other minor ailments. See *The New York Times*, May 10, 2001.
7. "The Evolving Virus," *Harvard AIDS Review*, Winter/Spring 2001.
8. Andrew Sullivan, "Profit of Doom?" *New Republic*, March 26, 2001.

